

# Autobiography: Douglas Faust Blackledge

I was a military “Brat”, but even more than that, I come from a long history of military men and exceptional achievers. In short, I’ve had a lot to live up to. And that could very well be the core of what’s caused the majority of angst in my life.

I am the number one son of the number one son of the Captain. My Granddad, Captain Allan Blackledge, USNA Class of 1920, was the patriarch of his family, with 5 children. They all wanted to be the best for the Captain, which always led to intense (but loving) rivalry amongst the siblings. Unfortunately for the 3 oldest siblings, they were not boys. They immediately lost that competition once my Dad was born.

And so, the legacy continued. My Dad, USNA Class of 1963, had a full 20 year career as an Air Force officer (he saw the light and cross commissioned out of Annapolis). He met my mom as a young lieutenant, and I was eventually born to them while my dad was teaching, ironically, at the U.S. Air Force Academy that would become my Alma Mater nearly 22 years later.

My childhood was happy. I didn’t have any bizarre experiences or abusive situations. I was a fairly mild mannered kid that had normal friends. The first move I remember was from Virginia to Las Vegas (age 5) then Vegas to Albuquerque, NM, just before my 9th birthday. I thought that timing was pretty cool because I got to have one birthday party in Las Vegas, then a second one in Albuquerque which helped me meet new friends quickly. My Dad retired in ABQ, so that’s where most of my growing up occurred.

I enjoyed playing with my friends in the neighborhood. We lived in the foothills of the mountains, so there was a lot of outdoor activity. We rode our bikes on the mountain trails and climbed rocks a lot. I had a tendency to be a little bit whiny. I cried to my parents when things didn’t go my way. Then one day I had the proverbial boy who cried wolf experience. I was playing on the large boulders in my backyard. I tried to jump from one boulder to grab onto a railing supporting the deck on the back of my house, slipped and fell onto the cement porch below. My wrist was broken, and I ran screaming into the house. My parents told me to quiet down and sent me to my room to “calm down.” I eventually managed to remove the wristband concealing the 90° angle where a straight arm should have been. My mom rolled her eyes and called my Dad over: “Oh, shit, Mike. He really did break it!” I didn’t cry as much after that.

My Dad pushed me to do well, or at least to give my best effort in everything I did. He was obviously proud of me when I did well, but didn’t get on my case if I wasn’t the best, or if there was somebody who was better than me. He did, however, know

if I hadn't given 100%, and I carried the shame I felt from his uncomfortable silence. I was always harder on myself than he was. So I guess if you're looking for that secret psychological deep seated thing, that's probably it. I never felt like I was quite good enough, because there was always room where I could have done better. And here's the kicker: when I was doing the best out of all competitors, whatever the arena (sports, academics, social standing), I managed to sabotage myself somehow because I didn't ever feel like I was worthy of being the king of the mountain.

So I moved on from my "normal" childhood and typical happy but occasionally awkward teenage years, 4 years Varsity Soccer, 3 years wrestling, National Honor Society, conversationally fluent in Spanish, graduate in the top 5% of my high school class, blah blah blah, etc. etc. Perfectly groomed to continue my destiny as the number one son of the number one son of the Captain.

I entered as one of the 1000+ initial members of the U.S. Air Force Academy Class of '92. All of the sudden, I was surrounded by people like me. Not all exactly the same, but they were all high achievers. I finally didn't need to self sabotage. Things weren't so easy for me anymore. I found myself having to work extremely hard to compete with my peers on every scale! I loved it! I thrived on it! I was gloriously ... Average!

I began to make friends, and over time as our weekend privileges expanded, we started going out partying to relieve our mutual pent up stress and frustration. I found a unique camaraderie in having drinking buddies that had the same angst I felt. And we took care of each other. We never left a man behind. Dump him into the trunk of the car in freezing cold if you had to, but we made sure everyone was back in time for the next formation.

It was the norm at most of our parties to drink like fish and get a little crazy, so we did. It's just that most of the guys quit drinking when they felt tired or felt they had enough. I just wanted to keep going.

I think my first blackout was during college, but I don't remember (no joke intended). By the grace of God, I managed to graduate relatively unscathed with my commission.

I followed my girlfriend to my first military assignment where she had already been established for a year. I quickly met her group of friends, and much more friends of my own, mostly associated with Friday nights at the Club. I had a built-in designated driver with my girlfriend. I thought that was a pretty good deal, so I married her. (OK, there were several other reasons.) The partying continued, but since I was free from the "Zoo" (college), I was an "adult" now, so I kept my own booze at home as well. The daily routine began: Get home from work, wife was still working, I was bored, so I started to have a few drinks. For a few years, it remained pretty mild drinking, with a few stints of complete non-drinking. Then I went to pilot

training. My wife had to stay at her assignment, so I was living on my own. Work, study, study, drink, and repeat. Drinkers seem to seek each other out, so those of us that drank hung out together and encouraged each other, both in studies and in drinking.

After pilot training, we moved to my first flying assignment. I excelled as a co-pilot, and seemingly to me, I was one of the “good guys.” I would have a few beers with the other pilots after work, listen to their stories, etc. We all deployed together, strengthening our bond, and getting together more frequently for social gatherings, usually involving lots of drinking.

My flying skills increased, as did my levels of responsibility and supervision in the squadron, the Wing, and the Air Force. Shop Chief, Flight Commander, “18<sup>th</sup> Wing’s #1 helicopter tactics expert,” COO of the Qtr. All the while drinking a little bit more and more, and having to hide it even more.

I got stationed back in my hometown of ABQ with the task of teaching young special ops aircrew how to become hardened terrorist killing warriors. I was at the top of my game, at least it looked that way from the outside. Really, my life and sanity were crumbling because of booze. I was just really good at hiding it.

While in ABQ, I got to spend some time close to my family. And, after a few years there, I got to watch my Mom die an alcoholic. We were all devastated. My Dad was very strong about it. What I think I realize now is that he was probably relieved that it was finally over. He wasn’t chained to a spouse that was chained to a bottle. Of course, hindsight’s 20/20. I wish that had registered more strongly with me at the time, because my wife was chained to me and my bottle in the same way. The only difference is that she didn’t wait around for me to croak, she had the strength to break the chain. Or, probably more truthfully, she was just too tired to hold on to the chain anymore and she just let it go. So (my bottle and I) sunk to the bottom of our sea of booze and she floated away.

So now I’m in Germany, flying a desk. I have been medically disqualified from flying status for 2 months now. I intend to pursue a waiver, recently motivated by this program. Life will go on. It won’t be perfect. There’s a lot I’m still learning and figuring out. But I will press forward, work as hard as I can and make the most of what God has presented to me.



The above is from an autobiography written by Doug as an assignment from his Air Force rehabilitation program at Landstuhl Air Base, Landstuhl, Germany early in 2010. Life did go on – for awhile. The year 2010 was one of Doug’s best; he would note 19 January 2010 as a ‘new birthdate’ as that was his last day to take a drink –

for a long time. He called me on that day, the end of a three-day weekend, to tell me: "Dad – I cannot control my drinking." That was the first time ever I had heard him admit that.

The year 2009 was one of Doug's worst. It started with a fall at home that was so bad that Robin called 911 to have him admitted to the hospital. That resulted in his entry (and as Doug would say, his immediate failure) in the ADAPT program – Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention & Treatment program. When Doug called me to tell me about this, he had been drinking heavily, his voice was slurred and his speech was incoherent; part of it he told me he had been diagnosed with chronic depression.

Robin left Germany in April 1009; she had been offered a permanent job by the contractor who had used her part-time in Germany, but would require her to move to Alexandria, Va to begin the full-time employment. Doug continued his downhill slide. In May 2009, he underwent his 3<sup>rd</sup> DWI, but this time it was on the Autobahn, and the Germans are not as lenient as the US: Doug lost his driver's license for one year. This entailed a combination of riding his bike and taking the train to work daily.

The home that Robin and Doug had leased was a fairly long distance to Ramstein AFB, and Doug soon ended that lease, moving from the small town of Frogstihl to Landstuhl. From one of the Drug and Alcohol abuse programs, he met Simone Heinze, who had a son Marc, and they moved in together, as Doug would say, creating an instant family. Bonnie and I went to visit Doug at the end of 2009, at the request of Doug's boss, LtCol Mathis. He called me to tell me he was really worried about Doug, in particular at the time after Christmas leading to New Year's parties. Bonnie and I went out there, met Simone, went out to dinner with Doug and Simone, and noted that Doug insisted on buying a beer, just to show us that he could control his drinking.